

## Class size, Gonski and schools funding: what are the facts?

By Zyngier David

The Gonski reforms to school funding are front and centre in this election year. But despite their prominence, much of the plan – including who will pay – is yet to be decided.

But while we watch what happens next, some are still suggesting that funding isn't the problem in Australian education. They point to the funding spent on reducing class sizes as an example, arguing that this extra funding did not see better academic results.

The Grattan Institute's Dr Ben Jensen has recently revived this argument. And many politicians and those who want to reduce public school funding seem to agree.

But the evidence, it turns out, tells quite a different story.

### Funding foibles

For starters, you only have to look at what your local private school is promoting. If small classes are not important than why are elite schools putting up billboards like this one?



Small classes are a feature for elite private schools. Author

And despite claims to the contrary, the facts according to the OECD are that public education funding in Australia as a percentage of total government expenditure has actually decreased in the last 10 years from 4.9% to 4.4% (except for 2008 during the Building the Education Revolution program).

Compare this to world leader Finland's expenditure of 6.1% in 2001 rising to over 7% in 2012.

Australian spending on education as a proportion of GDP is below the OECD average of 6.2 per cent.

Australian government and private expenditure on schools as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product amounted to only 3.1% of GDP in 2012.

Of the 29 OECD countries for which data was available, only seven countries ranked lower than Australia on this measure.

Finally the top level of pay for Australian teachers in both primary and secondary schools ranked 18th out of the 34 countries.

At \$US47,445 a year for those with minimum training, it was a long way behind the top employer Luxembourg, which pays teachers of the same level \$US128,181.

Despite this, it's also claimed that much of this expenditure in the last 20 to 30 years has been "wasted" on efforts to reduce class sizes.

Most of this line of thinking relies heavily on Dr Jensen's report on Australian education and teacher quality. In that, Jensen suggests that the majority of studies around the world have shown that class size reductions do not significantly improve student outcomes and that the funds should have been redirected to enhancing teacher quality.

Jensen bases his conclusions largely on controversial reports by conservative economist Professor Hanushek which have been largely discredited by acclaimed academic Professor David Berliner, past president of the American Education Research Association.

Berliner along with many other educators point out that these studies do not examine class size directly but rather a proxy measure presumed to represent it – student-teacher ratio.

In fact, we do not know what class sizes are in our schools (beyond a mandated maximum).

All that we know is an artificial pupil teacher ratio which simply divides all Equivalent Full Time (EFT) teaching staff (including non teaching principals, Assistant Principals, welfare officers, psychologists, special educators, librarians, ESL specialists etc.) into the total number of students.

### **Mixed up evidence**

While group size and ratio are related, they involve different assumptions about how investment changes opportunities for students and teachers.

Class size directs attention to the learning environment while pupil ratio is typically an economic category illustrating the amount of money spent.

As Professor John Hattie explains, the problem is that teachers in smaller classes are adopting the same teaching methods as in their previously larger classes.

Small classes or shared teaching spaces require a move from transmission education through to viewing students as co-learners and even teachers. This is a major re-conceptualisation of what it means to be an excellent teacher – from control to trust and participation, as Hattie explains.

Many of the more powerful influences Hattie identifies clearly show that teachers would be even more effective in smaller classrooms.

### **Reality check**

Although the results of individual studies are always questionable, a range of studies have now appeared on the effects of small classes.

These studies are peer reviewed (unlike Jensen's work) and have made some key findings:

- the extra gains found for long-term attendance in small classes (in the early grades) continued to appear when students were returned to standard classes in the upper grades;
- extra gains associated with long-term attendance in small classes (in the early grades) appeared not only for tests of measured achievement but also for other measures of success in education;
- the initial results indicate that the greater gains experienced by students from groups that are traditionally disadvantaged were retained when those students were returned to standard classes;
- when it is planned thoughtfully and funded adequately, long-term exposure to small classes in the early grades generates substantial advantages for students in schools, and those extra gains are greater the longer students are exposed to those classes;
- extra gains from small classes in the early grades are larger when class size is reduced to less than 20 students;
- evidence for the possible advantages of small classes in the upper grades and high school is so far inconclusive.
- It appears that very large class-size reductions, on the order of magnitude of 7-10 fewer students per class, can have meaningful long-term effects on student achievement and perhaps on non-cognitive outcomes. The academic effects seem to be largest when introduced in the earliest grades, and for students from less advantaged family backgrounds. They may also be largest in classrooms of teachers who are less well prepared and effective in the classroom.

It is also evident that for certain groups of Indigenous children, children from low SES, cultural and linguistic disenfranchised communities, the early years and children with learning and behavioural difficulties – smaller class sizes and increased teacher pupil ratios is very beneficial – both for student learning outcomes, behavioural modification and teacher satisfaction.

To suggest then that investment in smaller class sizes is not necessary for schools indicates a need for a serious reality check – or at least a few weeks in one of these schools as a teacher.